

Orlando Sentinel  
May 18, 2005

### **Resist Sugar**

*Our position: Free-trade pact deserves the support of Sens. Martinez and Nelson.*

Florida has a great deal to gain from congressional approval for CAFTA, the free-trade agreement with five Central American countries and the Dominican Republic.

Yet Florida's two U.S. senators, Democrat Bill Nelson and Republican Mel Martinez, say they are undecided on the treaty. Both are no doubt feeling pressure from the politically powerful sugar industry, which is rallying opposition to the treaty along with labor and environmental groups.

CAFTA would expand markets for exporters, lower prices for consumers and reinforce democracy on America's doorstep by spurring economic growth in the region. It includes provisions to promote labor and environmental protections in the CAFTA countries.

CAFTA also is an essential step toward a free-trade pact covering the Western Hemisphere. If Miami's bid to be headquarters for that larger trading bloc succeeds, Florida could gain thousands of jobs.

But CAFTA would allow an increase in sugar imports equivalent to 1.2 percent of U.S. consumption in the treaty's first year, and less than 2 percent by the 15th year. Big Sugar, one of the most protected U.S. industries, isn't even willing to concede that tiny amount.

Instead of just admitting its self-interest in defeating CAFTA, Big Sugar has resorted to misleading or groundless assertions to try to derail the trade agreement.

In a recent letter to the Sentinel, a spokeswoman for Clewiston-based U.S. Sugar Corp. belittled the economies of the "five nations" covered under the treaty. In fact, the six countries, combined, are Florida's leading export destination. The state's exports to the region last year reached \$3.2 billion.

The U.S. Sugar spokeswoman also claimed that any gains in trade between Florida and the CAFTA countries would be "relatively insignificant" if the treaty is approved. But since the North American Free Trade Agreement was signed in 1993, Florida's exports to Mexico and Canada, combined, have grown nearly 95 percent, according to the Office of the United States Trade Representative.

The U.S. Sugar spokeswoman also contended the treaty would "hardly spur the economy or bolster democracy" in the CAFTA countries. That's a conclusion at odds with statements from the presidents of those countries. Last week, Nicaraguan President Enrique Bolanos said, "This free-trade agreement with the United States will provide tools for democracy."

As a U.S. senator, Mr. Nelson has voted for free-trade pacts with Chile, Singapore, Morocco and Australia. None of those was as vital to Florida as CAFTA.

Mr. Martinez told the Sentinel during his Senate campaign that he supports free trade. His vote on CAFTA will attest to his sincerity.

If Mr. Nelson and Mr. Martinez consider all the benefits the agreement would bring to Florida and the nation as a whole rather than fixate on Big Sugar's wishes, they will eagerly support CAFTA.